

The Republican Tale of Two Commercials

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The Super Bowl is known almost as much for the commercials which run during the game as for the game itself. Sunday's game was no exception. Two commercials, [one by Chrysler](#) and [one by Pete Hoekstra](#), a Republican Senate candidate in Michigan, were significant because of their interesting political message. The former was aired nationally, but the latter was only shown in Michigan.

The Chrysler commercial stars Clint Eastwood, the actor who became famous for playing tough guys on screen, but who has also built an impressive career as a director and even served as mayor of Carmel, California from 1986-1988. Eastwood is no Hollywood liberal. He has supported numerous Republican candidates for president including Richard Nixon and John McCain and made public statements indicating he is a conservative libertarian. In the Chrysler advertisement, Eastwood asserts that it is "halftime in America," and that America can't be "knocked out with just one punch." This is generic patriotic rhetoric, albeit rhetoric that was beautifully filmed and performed.

The advertisement generated some controversy because some argued that its message was too positive and [thus in favor of President Obama](#), or even that it was Chrysler's way of publicly thanking the president for supporting the automobile industry. It says a lot about the state of political life that images of conservative tough guy walking and explaining that America should never give up is seen as a partisan message in support of a Democratic president, whose detractors view him as weak and a socialist. In reality, Eastwood's appearance and words had little to do with Obama.

For observers with a long political memory it was hard not to think of another president when seeing that commercial. The Chrysler commercial was right out of the playbook of another California conservative who was optimistic about America, Ronald Reagan. Reagan's presidency is increasingly seen through inappropriately rose tinted glasses, but he understood the value of optimism in political life, particularly for conservative politicians. Despite its echoes of Reagan, the Chrysler advertisement would, with a few adjustments, nonetheless work for Obama who in order to win another term must convince Americans that things are getting better and that we should never give up.

It would also, however, be an equally effective message, again with a few adjustments, for Mitt Romney's campaign against Obama. Romney could do a lot worse than running on a message that the U.S. is going through some tough times, but that, with a new president, and if we all work together, things will get better for all Americans. The reason the ad could work for either party is because the sentiment is one behind which most Americans can, and want, to get.

Americans want to believe it is only halftime in America and that the game isn't over yet. Americans also want to believe that we are a people who cannot be defeated easily and with resolve and hard work can continue to rebuild our economy and our country. Fortunately, for Obama and the Democrats this does not seem to be the message on which the Republicans are basing their campaign.

Instead, if Pete Hoekstra's senate campaign is any indication, the Republican strategy will be one of thinly veiled racism with an overlay of name-calling of the kind that is more frequently found on a playground of not very creative eight year olds than in senate campaign. Hoekstra's commercial has generated a fair amount of attention because it features an Asian American actress playing a Chinese woman speaking in poor English. Here Hoekstra draws from stereotypes about Asians and Asian Americans that have been displayed on screen for decades, but which are no longer as ubiquitous as they once were.

In addition to being what is euphemistically called racially insensitive, Hoekstra's advertisement also ridicules Senator Debbie Stabenow's surname, referring to her as Debbie Spend it Now. This is very clever because Stabenow and Spent it Now rhyme. Hoekstra has managed to make a commercial where making fun of the name of a sitting U.S. Senator is only the second most immature and offensive thing in the ad.

Together these two commercials, and the reactions to them, demonstrate how the Republicans have backed themselves into an angry, insensitive and cynical corner. The optimism which came naturally to Reagan, through which whose presidency I lived and for whom I am no apologist, has no place in the angry Republican Party of the 21st Century. Instead, the Republicans find themselves disagreeing and yelling foul at a commercial urging Americans to keep fighting and never give up while being reduced to making fun of names and accents in their campaigns.